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Studying abroad: encouraging students to return to Kyrgyzstan

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Abstract: More and more students from Kyrgyzstan are now studying at foreign universities, where they gain knowledge and skills that are vital for Kyrgyzstan's development and prosperity. But many face difficulties in finding opportunities to apply their new skills upon their return. This issue of evidence for policy examines the causes and consequences of this situation, and examines challenges of making student migration advantageous for Kyrgyzstan.

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research evidence for policy



A Kyrgyz architecture student studying in Switzerland presents her thesis on "Aesthetic and energy improvement of the panel apartment buildings in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan". Photo: Philipp Stäheli (2012)

Studying abroad: encouraging students to return to Kyrgyzstan

NCCR north south



Case studies featured here were conducted in Kyrgyzstan

Policy Messages

- How many students study abroad, and how many return? How many specialists does the country need, and in which disciplines? Kyrgyzstan lacks adequate statistics on these questions.
- Kyrgyzstan should appropriately recognise foreign PhD degrees to encourage young highly qualified professionals to return to the country.
- Kyrgyzstan is suffering from a brain drain because many graduates choose to stay in their host countries after earning degrees abroad. Incentives are needed to encourage them to return to Kyrgyzstan, where their knowledge and skills can benefit the country's development.

- More and more students from Kyrgyzstan are now studying at foreign universities, where they gain knowledge and skills that are vital for Kyrgyzstan's development and prosperity. But many face difficulties in finding opportunities to apply their new skills upon their return. This issue of *evidence for policy* examines the causes and consequences of this situation, and examines challenges of making student migration advantageous for Kyrgyzstan.

Linking education and employment

- The number of people studying outside their home country is increasing worldwide, with some 4 million students migrating abroad for education in 2010 (OECD 2012). This trend holds for Kyrgyzstan too: the number of students from Kyrgyzstan at foreign universities has increased in recent years, but only selective numbers are available and they vary widely depending on the source. The German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD 2012) indicates that 1.5% of all students from Kyrgyzstan study abroad. Top destinations include Russia, Turkey, Kazakhstan, Germany, and the USA. Looking at Turkey, for example, there are no agreed-upon official numbers that enable tracking of students from Kyrgyzstan – only partial statistics are available: the Turkish Embassy in Kyrgyzstan sent 3,286 students to Turkey between 1991 and 2012; the Kyrgyz

Ministry of Education registered between 1,800 and 2,000 students who were sent through a Turkey-Kyrgyzstan interstate agreement between 1991 and 2010; and the Association of Kyrgyz students who graduated in Turkey "Egemendik" (Independence) suggests that 6,500 students from Kyrgyzstan received education in Turkey so far. The main attractions of pursuing a degree abroad are the higher quality of education, better job opportunities, and the ability to study certain disciplines not taught in Kyrgyzstan. Plus, studying abroad is a chance to visit other places and escape from local norms such as early marriage.

Many students hope that an international degree will be an entry ticket for a career abroad or into the international arena back in Kyrgyzstan. The return of graduates is thus closely linked to the labour market and a potential gain or loss of skilled workers.

Featured case studies

Bolashak: a presidential scholarship programme in Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan offers opportunities for study in the world's best universities to up to 3,000 young, talented citizens a year. They are sent under the strict condition that they return when they have finished their studies. They are all given jobs at state agencies and institutions in Kazakhstan, where they are required to work for at least five years. Each year the Ministry of Education and Science prepares a list of priority disciplines. This is the basis for selecting candidates. Many returnees now work in decision-making positions and make significant contributions to the country's economy (www.edu-cip.kz).

Academic Fellowship Program

The Open Society Foundations started their Academic Fellowship Program in 2004. The aim is to contribute to higher education reform by supporting promising local scholars and promoting their return, and assisting progressive universities in Southeastern Europe, parts of the former Soviet Union, and Mongolia in reform. In Kyrgyzstan, the programme supports over 20 returning scholars in two partner universities: the American University of Central Asia and the Kyrgyz National University. It encourages these scholars to be part of international academic networks, follows their academic progress, and supports them financially. It helps promising returned young scholars to build their academic careers, improve curricula, and contribute to their country.

- **Effective use of skills and knowledge of returned students**
- For a country with few natural resources like Kyrgyzstan, human capital is an important element for social and economic prosperity.
- Studying and living abroad enhance explicit skills, such as subject-specific knowledge, as well as tacit knowledge such as enhanced language, communication and management abilities. They encourage contacts with the outside world and make it important for Kyrgyzstan to retain students who have studied abroad.
- Some graduates are indeed successful in finding employment or establishing private businesses upon their return to Kyrgyzstan. But for many, finding a suitable job at home can be tough in a country where personal contacts often play a more important role than skills and knowledge. It is particularly difficult to get a job with state agencies and institutions. Furthermore, only a few private businesses can offer employment to international graduates and benefit from their knowledge and skills. Returned graduates who want to start businesses often complain about bureaucratic obstacles.
- Many Kyrgyz students who have studied abroad opt to stay in (or go back to) the countries where they were educated for further studies or work. Others find better employment opportunities in third countries. For young, skilled specialists, a higher salary is a big inducement to leave Kyrgyzstan again.
- Overall political instability and frequent changes in government and legislation are other factors discouraging new business initiatives and international investment. There is a need for measures to increase the demand for graduates with foreign degrees, and to make sure that student migration is more favourable for Kyrgyzstan.

Student migration channels: opportunities and limitations

Students from Kyrgyzstan go abroad through four main channels: foreign scholarships, programmes offered under intergovernmental agreements, funding by the government of Kyrgyzstan, and self-funding. Most foreign scholarship programmes support study only in certain disciplines, while in intergovernmental agreements the host universities allocate quotas for each discipline to students from Kyrgyzstan.

At present, there is no specific information on how many graduates Kyrgyzstan needs in which fields and disciplines. Most scholarship programmes are open for collaboration to ensure that they contribute to and address a country's needs. But Kyrgyzstan's government does not have an effective procedure for such collaboration.

In the first years after independence in 1991, the government of Kyrgyzstan realised the importance of qualified human resources. In 1995, it initiated a presidential programme called "Cadre of the 21st Century" to prepare future government employees abroad. But this was criticised as corrupt and not transparent, and was stopped, leaving some students to look for alternative funding to complete their studies. Many did not return to Kyrgyzstan. Those who did come back, however, faced little competition, so were quite successful in their careers. Unfortunately there is very little information about the programme in general, and its effectiveness has not been analysed.

Statistics on student migration

The Kyrgyzstan Ministry of Education and Science (MES) does not have complete statistical data about student migrants. While it is possible to obtain such data for students going abroad under intergovernmental agreements and foreign scholarship programmes from respective sources, there is no unified database on how many people go for study abroad each year, which countries and universities they go to, and which disciplines they pursue. Information about self-funded students and returned graduates is virtually non-existent.

Encouraging return

Both the government and the broader public recognise the potential benefits for Kyrgyzstan of returned graduates. In 2012, for the first time, two forums were held to address the country's need for the skills and knowledge of Kyrgyz citizens studying, working, and living abroad. These forums, titled "Mekendeshter" ("Compatriots"), were organised by the Initiative of Roza Otunbayeva, an international foundation, in collaboration with the government of Kyrgyzstan and Zamandash ("Contemporary"), an association of Kyrgyz migrants.



Kyrgyz students studying abroad feel a great attachment to their home country, and many of them desire to use their knowledge for their home country's benefit.

Photo: Kyrgyzstan Friendship and Culture Organization (2011)

Definitions

Student migration:

For this policy brief we define student migration as where someone takes an entire degree (master's or PhD) at a university outside their own country.

Brain drain:

Large-scale emigration of individuals with knowledge and skills relevant for the local labour market. The usual causes include the social, economic, and political environment in the home country, a better environment in a host country, and personal preferences.



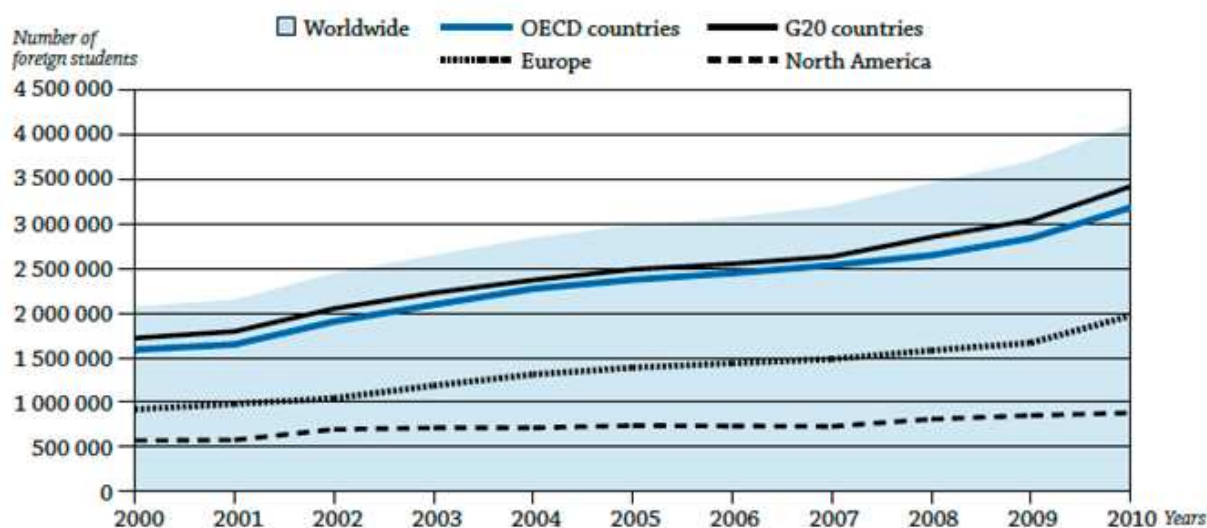
While foreign scholarship programmes have vital alumni networks, state-funded programmes have little contact with students prior to their departure, during their stay abroad, or after their return to Kyrgyzstan. As a result, many students become completely detached from Kyrgyzstan and choose to remain abroad. Having children during their stay abroad often makes it less likely that students will return. All of the above factors lead to the temporary migration of students turning into permanent emigration.

Recognising foreign PhD degrees

For many years, the recognition of foreign degrees was problematic in Kyrgyzstan. The Ministry of Education and Science says that all foreign BA and MA degrees are now automatically recognised in Kyrgyzstan. But foreign PhDs are still under consideration: a government regulation provides the foundation for recognising such degrees, but it is not clear what status a PhD degree will have compared to the local qualifications of Candidate of Science and Doctor of Science.

Such uncertainties (along with financial considerations) are the main reasons why PhD holders choose to work outside academia, or for international universities based in Kyrgyzstan. Or they leave the country in search of better options. As a consequence, the state educational sector in particular loses potential employees who could develop up-to-date, effective curricula, build international networks, and access the latest knowledge to improve the quality of local education.

Number of students enrolled outside their country of citizenship, by destination (2000–2010)



Source: OECD (2012)



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Policy implications of NCCR North-South research

Managing student migration

The Kyrgyz government should pay more attention to student migration so as to use students' skills and potential for the national benefit. It should analyse the potential of various sectors of the economy and prioritise appropriate disciplines for students to study abroad. These disciplines should be recommended to scholarship programmes and incorporated into national programmes. Initiatives like the "Cadre of the 21st Century" are important for Kyrgyzstan, but they need to be transparent and include ways to ensure that participants return and have good employment prospects.

Recognition of foreign PhD degrees

A coherent policy is needed on the recognition of foreign PhD degrees. The country has introduced a two-level degree system: undergraduate (bachelor's degree) and graduate (master's). Because an increasing number of students earn PhD degrees from foreign universities, policymakers should consider introducing a PhD system and automatically recognising foreign PhDs. Removing this barrier would foster the return of young professionals to Kyrgyzstan.

Incentives to return

In a market economy it is difficult to regulate the return of student migrants and promise them jobs, especially for those who self-fund their studies or find independent scholarship programmes. A mechanism to encourage students to return and guarantee them jobs should be considered under state-funded programmes and those based on intergovernmental agreements.

Policy coherence

Policies related to cross-border education must be compatible. Relevant policy areas include quality assurance and recognition of university degrees, coherent development efforts in education, and other aspects of domestic education, migration, visas, trade, and the economy.

Further reading

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
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